

## Making History

### *Tunisia honors the country's first female physician on its 10 dinar banknote*

**Melinda Weir**

**WHEN A TEAM** from the Central Bank of Tunisia looked into redesigning some of their banknotes a few years ago, they knew they wanted to honor a contemporary figure on the 10 dinar note, someone who had made significant contributions to their country—who was, as Bank Governor Marouane El Abassi put it, “a bearer of Tunisian expertise.”

They selected the late Tawhida Ben Cheikh (1909–2010), Tunisia’s trailblazing first female physician, as the face of the new banknote, which debuted in spring 2020.

Among many firsts, Ben Cheikh was the first female student in Tunisia to receive a university

degree, in 1928, and reportedly was the first North African Muslim woman to earn a medical degree (in 1936, from the University of Paris). She is thought to be the first modern female doctor not only in Tunisia but in the Arab world.

Ben Cheikh has made history again, albeit posthumously, as the second woman to have her likeness featured on Tunisian currency. She follows Elissa (Dido), the legendary founder and queen of ancient Carthage, who first appeared on the 10 dinar banknote in 2005. The new banknote is also reportedly the first in the world to honor a female physician.

“I thought clearly that we need someone from the contemporary era,” said El Abassi, adding that they were not explicitly looking for a female honoree. “After the revolution of a decade ago, we wanted the banknotes to be a mirror of the whole country.”

### **Influential**

After her return to Tunis, Ben Cheikh opened a private medical clinic that treated patients regardless of nationality or ability to pay. The only female doctor in the country for some years, she became influential in Tunisian medicine, family planning practices, and legislation; as an obstetrician-gynecologist she founded the country’s first family planning clinic and led campaigns around access to contraception and abortion, which was first legalized to a limited degree in 1965. Ben Cheikh was the first female doctor accepted in the National Council of the Order of Physicians of Tunisia. Later in her career she served as vice president of the Tunisian Red Crescent.

Born into a conservative, well-to-do family, Ben Cheikh credited the support of her widowed mother for her ability to achieve high levels of education, despite opposition from male



PHOTOS: COURTESY OF THE CENTRAL BANK OF TUNISIA

*Tunisia's new 10 dinar banknotes debuted in spring 2020. They feature a portrait of Dr. Tawhida Ben Cheikh and intricate Berber pottery and jewelry.*



relatives, at a time when such opportunities for women in colonial Tunisia were rare. Nearly a century later, female students are fully represented at Tunisian colleges and universities, according to El Abassi, with women comprising over half the student population. In 2018, Tunisia was designated the “Capital of Arab Women 2018–2019” by the Arab League in recognition of efforts in the country to promote the status of women.

The vivid blue 10 dinar banknotes honoring Ben Cheikh, designed by Ali Fakhret, a Tunisian artist, feature

- A portrait of Ben Cheikh on the front
- Images of handmade, intricately designed Berber pottery and jewelry on the back
- Security details such as three-dimensional threads, iridescent coating, micro-text printing, circles with a spinning effect, translucent features, and fluorescent fibers that glow when exposed to ultraviolet rays

### Timely tribute

In addition to honoring the legacy of Ben Cheikh and the generations of women she inspired, the new banknote is meant to celebrate the contributions of all Tunisian women, according to El Abassi.

Although designed before the COVID-19 pandemic struck, the new banknote pays tribute to Tunisia’s doctors and other essential—and mostly female—health care workers during the crisis. “This was a very good message to the doctors and health care workers who are fighting COVID-19 in Tunisia.”

Public reception of the new banknote has been positive, El Abassi said. To better reach younger Tunisians, the central bank worked with a local start-up to develop an augmented reality app, “Flouss,” to tell the stories behind their banknotes. **FD**

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*Tawhida Ben Cheikh and other members of AEMNA (Association of North African Muslim Students) in Paris, 1930. Ben Cheikh would go on to become the first female physician in Tunisia and the Arab world, and later vice president of the Tunisian Red Crescent.*